SECTION TWO

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OVER THE BORDER.

BY ROBERT BARR.

CHAPTER I.
Assertion.

A DOOMED man walked that November day in the Home park before Hampton Court palace—doomed doubly. For the tall, masterful form, bending unwillingly, rebelliously as a wrestler bends at last before superior might, showed that Providence had stricken him with mortal disease. And even as he walked, with his distinguished retinue respectful and obedient behind him, his enemies were plotting against that shortening life—plotting in secrecy and fear, for well they knew that did the Earl of Strafford but suspect, he would strike first and hard.

Some of the highest in the land walked humbly behind him, accommodating their steps to his faltering, yet determined, tread, and showing more deference to Thomas Wentworth, earl of Strafford, than they would have shown to the king. For here stepped the real king—whose shattered frame still was to be feared more than that of the most stalwart man in all Merry England that day.

He walked the grounds of the king as if he owned them. Although no echo of the clamoring of London's mobs came to his ear, he knew that at that moment they were crying out against him. And he despised them as he had despised the turbulent land of Ireland which he had held numb under his strong hand until he obeyed the command of Charles to travel to London.

Despite the seriousness of the time, the conversation of the party was light and frivoling, as then obtained at court. But it was interrupted suddenly.

From behind a thick tree there stepped a girl. She was tall and slender, with brave eyes full of the blackness, the mystery and the power of night. Black, too, was her hair, flowing in beauty over shapely, proud shoulders.

Her costume betokened the country rather than the court, but its lack of fashionable cut or texture was not noticed in that company of men, and the admiring looks that rested on her showed that in their eyes she was full admirable.

"My Lord of Strafford," she said in a clear, sweet voice, "I crave a word with you in private."

The earl, startled into surprise at her first appearance, frowned blackly with annoyance at the daring interloper. He spoke no word; but his underlings were accustomed to study his face apprehensively. Swiftly two attendants placed themselves at her side, ready to seize her did his lordship give the word. The huntsman, more officious still, loosed his dogs that had been snarling at her.

They dashed forward soon as the leash was slipped. But the girl sprang nimbly to the tree, and as she leaped backward, she whisked from the scabbard of an amazed attendant the light sword with which he was supposed to guard his master and himself.

"Call off your hounds, villain!" she cried in a voice that rang imperious command. "I order you, not for myself, but for them. I would rather wound a man than a dog. Scoundrel, you shall feel the sting of this point if you do not instantly obey."

The thin blade darted like an adder's tongue. Yelps showed its potency, and the dogs, quick to know that they were overmatched, contented themselves with noisy outcry at a safe distance.

At a glance from the earl, the huntsman leashed them again. Strafford gazed darkly at the girl.

"What do you wish?" he asked.

"I have told you, my lord. I wish a word in your private ear."

"Speak out what you have to say."

"'Tis to be heard by none but the Earl of Strafford; no, not even by the king himself."

"I have no secrets from the king."

"Nor need this be one. 'Tis yours to proclaim it to the world at your pleasure. But first it is for your ear alone. Send that painted popinjay to the rear with the dogs. The others are gentlemen and will retire of their own accord when they learn a lady wishes to speak privately with you."

A laugh went up from the British nobles at the reference to the "painted popinjay," who was none less than De Courcy, one of the great band of Frenchmen who were favorites at court because the consort of Charles had a predilection for her countrymen—a preference shared by none but her husband. They were regarded as titled mercenaries certainly, spies probably, dividing the unfortunate king still further from his suspicious people.

De Courcy fumbled with his sword hilt, muttering angrily that he was prepared to meet any who might wish to make the girl's scornful remark his own. But Strafford's fierce glance quelled the rising difference. Harshly he said to the young woman:

"Your presence shall be rewarded, but with this proviso: If the news you make so much of is not worth the telling, then shall you expiate your impudence in prison."

"I accept the hazard freely, my lord."

The Earl of Strafford said no more, but turned to his followers, who withdrew into the background at once, except De Courcy, who cried angrily:

"Beware, Lord Strafford. There may be more in this than appears. She has shown herself expert with a stolen blade. It is still in her hand."

The earl smiled coldly.

"'Tis but fair," he said, "that I should take some chance to equal hers. I'll chance the stroke."

The girl flung her rapier into the forest, and waved her disencumbered hand to the departing Frenchman, saying, mockingly:

"Farewell, popinjay. The treacherous ever make suggestion of treachery."

"What have you to say to me?" asked Strafford severely, bending his haughty glance upon her.

"Sir," her voice sank so that none might by any chance overhear, "Sir, I am Frances Wentworth, your lordship's eldest daughter."

CHAPTER II.
Recognition.

The earl lowered upon the girl and the anger upon his brow might have warned even a more intrepid person that there was peril in trifling. When at last he spoke, his voice was menacing.

"What do you expect to gain by a statement so preposterous?"

"I expect to gain a father."

The girl's answer trod quickly upon the heels of the question, but her color changed from red to pale and from pale to red again and her hurried breathing hinted of knowledge of the crisis. But she faced it without flinching.

"My eldest daughter is Ann, aged 13, a modest little maid. I take you to be older, and I should hesitate to apply to you the qualification I have just coupled with her name."

"I am 16, therefore her senior. If she is modest, it is reasonably to be expected, for she hath a mother's care. I have had none. If you detect a boldness in my manner, 'tis but another proof I am my father's daughter."

"Boldness is not a virtue," muttered Strafford to himself ruminating. "Sixteen years of age? Then what was in . . . ." The earl paused, as if the simple mathematical problem baffled him, the old look of weariness and pain clouding his downturned face.

"The year 1624," said the girl promptly.

"Doubtless. Doubtless, 1624. It is long since; longer than the days that have passed seem to indicate. I was a young man then, now . . . now I am an aged wreck, and all in sixteen years. And so, in you, the spirit of youth, the past, confronts me.

"Madam," he continued sharply, "you think I am an old dotard, who is ready to accept your absurd proposal. But I am not yet 50, nor as near it as these fell maladies would have me appear; and a man should be in his prime at 50. Madam, it will require more convincing testimony to make me listen to you further."

"Raise your eyes from the ground, my lord, and behold it. If, looking upon me, you deny that I am your daughter, I shall trouble you no more."

Strafford lifted his careworn face and his heavy eyes scanned her closely.

"Any man might be proud to claim you, girl, but you have not come here merely because some one flattered th Earl of Strafford by saying you resembled him."

"No, my lord. I am come to return to you this document which once you presented to my mother."

She handed to him a paper which he read with intent care.

"Madam:" (it ran)

"I have, in little, much to say to you, or else one of us must be much to blame. But in truth I have that confidence in you, and that assurance in myself, as to rest secure the fault will never be made on either side. Well, then, this short and this long which I aim at, is no more than to give you this first written testimony that I am your husband; and that husband of yours that will ever discharge those duties of love and respect towards you which good women may expect, and are justly due from good men to discharge them; and this is not only much, but all which belongs to me; and wherein I shall tread out the remainder of life which is left to me."

Strafford looked up from his perusal, blank amazement upon his countenance.

"How came you by this paper?"

"I found it among the documents left by my grandfather, who died a year ago. It was sent by you to my mother, Frances, daughter of Sir John Warburton, his only daughter, as I am hers, my lord."

"But when Sir John wrote to me coldly of her death he made no mention of any issue."

"My grandfather always hated you, my lord. It is very like that he told you not that the cause of my mother's death was her children's birth."

"Children?"

"Yes, my lord. My twin brother and myself."

The earl's hand trembled until the letter that he held shook like the autumn leaves above him. He conjured up the face of the boy whom he had supposed his only son and saw him challenged by a stranger, unknown and unloved.

This girl saw, with quick intuition, that she had lost her ground. Cold dislike tinctured the tone in which the next question was asked:

"Why is your brother not here in your place and you in the background where you properly belong?"

"Sir, my brother shares our grandfather's dislike of you. He is for the parliament and against the king. As for me, I know little of the questions that disturb the state. My only knowledge is that you are my father, and were you the wickedest person in the world I should come to you."

The Earl of Strafford raised his head abruptly, as one who has come to a decision.

"Come with me to the palace. In a world of lies I find myself believing you; thus I am not grown so old as I had feared. Come."

The girl was at his side in a moment.

"Sir, will you lean upon my shoulder?"

"No. I am ailing, but not decrepit."

He led her into a room on the first floor and sank into a deep arm chair beside the fire with a sigh of relief. For a few moments he regarded her with no pleased expression, then said petulantly:

"Did your grandfather bring you up a lady or are you an ignorant country wench?"

Quickly she drew back the small feet out-thrust to take advantage of the comforting fire, and the blaze showed her cheek a ruddier hue than heretofore.

"Sir," she said, "I was brought up without a mother's care in the ancient hall of a sour old grandfather, my brother my only companion. I can sometimes outfence him and, failing that, I can always outrun him. Any horse he can ride I can ride, and we two have before you put to flight three times our number of the yokels of the neighborhood. As to education, I have studied music to some advantage and foreign tongues with very little. I dare say there are many things known to your London ladies that I am ignorant of."

"We may thank God for that," muttered the earl.

The conversation was interrupted by a servant throwing open a door, crying:

"His majesty, the king."

"The girl sprang instantly to her feet, while her father rose more slowly, assisting himself with his hands on the arms of the chair.

CHAPTER III.
Majesty.

There was more of hurry than of kingly dignity in the entrance of Charles. The handsome face was marred by an imperious querulousness that, for the moment, detracted from its acknowledged nobility.

"Strafford," he cried impatiently, "I have been kept waiting. Servants are at this moment searching palace and park for you. Where have you been?"

"I was in the forest, your majesty. I am deeply grieved to learn that you needed me.

"I never needed you more than now. Are you ready to travel?"

Strafford's gloomy face almost lightened up.

"On the instant, your majesty," he replied with a sigh of relief.

"That is well. I trust your malady is alleviated, in some measure at least. Still I know that sickness has never been a bar to duty with you. Yet I ask no man to do what I am not willing to do myself for the good of the state, and I shall be shortly on the road at your heels."

"Whither, your majesty?" asked the earl, with falling countenance, for it was to Ireland he desired to journey, and he knew the king had no intention of moving toward the west.

"To London, of course; short stent over bad roads. But if you are ailing and fear the highway, a barge on the river is at your disposal."

"To London!" echoed the earl, something almost akin to dismay in his tone. "I had hoped your majesty would order me to Ireland which, I assure your majesty, has been somewhat neglected of late."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the king, brusquely. "I know your anxiety in that quarter. A man ever thinks that task the most important with which he intimately deals, but my position gives me a view over the whole realm, and the various matters of state assume their just proportions in my eyes; their due relations to each other. Ireland is well enough, but it is the heart and not the limbs of the empire that requires the physician's care. Parliament has opened badly, and is like to give trouble unless treated with a firm hand.

The hand of the earl appeared anything but firm. It wavered as it sought the support of the chair's arm.

"Have I your majesty's permission to be seated?" I am not well," Strafford said, faintly.

"Surely, surely," cried the king, himself taking a chair. "I am deeply grieved to see you so unwell, but a journey to London is a small matter compared with a march upon Dublin, which is like to have killed you in your present condition."

"Indeed, your majesty, the smaller journey may well have the more fatal termination," murmured the earl, but the king paid no attention to the remark, for his wandering eye now caught sight of a third in the conference, which brought surprised displeasure to his brow. The girl was standing behind the high back of the chair in which she had been seated, in a gloomy angle where the firelight, which played so plainly on the king and Strafford, did not touch her.

"In God's name, whom have we here? How comes this girl in my palace, so intimate with my Lord Strafford?"

The slumbering suspicion of Charles was aroused.

"She brings me proof, which I cannot deny, that she is my eldest daughter."

"Your eldest daughter!" cried the king, amazed. "Is you family, then, so far unknown to you that such a claimant may spring up at any moment?"

"I was married privately to the daughter of Sir John Warburton. Circumstances separated me from my wife, and although her father informed me curtly of her death, he said nothing of issue."

"Well," said Charles, "My Lord Strafford," he continued, reverting to his subject, "you will to London then?"

"Instantly, your majestry."

"I will consult with you there tomorrow. And have no fear, for on my oath as a man, on my honor as a king, I will protect you."

The king rose and left the room as abruptly as he had entered it.

Strafford ordered the coach, and fell into a reverie that lasted till the servant announced that it was ready. Then he ordered a woman's cloak brought for Frances, and himself fastened it at her throat.

Together they went down the dimly lighted steps. A cavalier stepped from the shadow of the arches, and Frances recognized him as the French spark whom she had so frankly characterized earlier in the day.

"My lord," protested De Courcy, jauntily, "you have your comrades at a disadvantage. You have captured the woodland nymph. I do protest 'tis most unfair to us."

"Sir," said Strafford, with severity, "I would have you know that the lady to whom you refer is the Honorable Frances Wentworth, my eldest daughter."

The Frenchman brought off his bonnet with an impressive sweep that brushed its ample feather lightly on the stones.

"My lady, may I have the honor of escorting you to the carriage?"

The girl shrank closer to her father, and made no reply. The earl bowed stiffly, but offered no objection, and the foreigner tripped daintily by her side, chattering most amiably of the queen and her proposed visit to London on the marrow.

On their arrival at the carriage the earl seated himself in the closed vehicle, and his daughter sprang nimbly in beside him, ignoring the proffered aid of De Courcy. Nothing was said until the jingling procession of carriage and mounted guards was well clear of the park, when the girl exclaimed with a shudder:

"I loathe that scented fop." Then, seeming to fear a reproof, added, "I know I should not say that, but I cannot see what you have in common with such a creature that you are civil to him."

The earl laughed lightly—the first time she had heard him do so.

"When we travel, Frances, safe out of earshot, you may loathe whom you pleace, but 'tis sometimes unsafe to give expression to your feelings within four walls. I may find little in common with a man, least of all with such as De Courcy, but the time to crush him is not yet. He has the ear of my enemy, the queen, and she has the ear of her husband."

"Sir, what reason have you to suspect that the queen moves against you?"

"One reason is that I am at this moment journeying east when I would be traveling west. In truth, my girl, you seem resolved unconsciously to show that you are your father's daughter, with that uncurbed tongue of yours, for a lack of lying is like to be my undoing. If I had told the king I must go to London 'tis most like we were now on our way to Dublin."

"But why does the king order you thus contrariwise?"

"I know the king. He is not, as many think, selfish, but he is weak and thinks himself strong—a most dangerous combination. Now, a weak monarch or a strong monarch matters little; England has been blessed with both, and has survived the blessing; but a monach who is weak and strong by turns courts disaster. 'War with the Scots,' says the king. He will smite them with a firm hand. Very good; a most desirable outcome. But our captains are promoted by a woman's whisper, and not by their merit. Our army is shattered. I am called, for God's sake, from Ireland, and I come, scarcely able, through illness, to sit my horse

"Very good. I cut up a portion of our Scotch friends, and the rest are on the run. What happens? An added title for me, you might suppose. Not so. A censure comes posthaste from London. 'Leave Scots alone. The king is treating with them.' In the face of victory he embraces defeat. I am left like a fool with a newly inspired army and no enemy. They term it negotiating in London, but I call it defeat.

"Very well. I accept the censure in humbleness and implore the king to call no parliament till we have time to set our house in order and face lords and commons with good grace. Then I set forth for London.

"Pushing on through darkness in the second night of my journey, a man thundered by me. 'Good friend,' cried I, 'what news that you ride so fast?'

"'Great news,' he answered, breathlessly. 'A parliament is summoned, and, as I am elected a member, I ride in haste. Please God, before the month is done we have Strafford's head in our hands and off his treacherous shoulders.'"

The girl gave a cry of terror.

"Oh, 'twas but a braggart countryman, knowing not to whom he spoke so freely. When I met the king he was all panic and regret. He had conjured up the devil easily enough, but knew not how to allay him. 'Tis my head they want,' I said. 'Do with it as you please. If it is useless to you, toss it to them; if useful, then send me to Ireland, where I shall be out of the way, yet ready to afford you what service lies in my power.

"He swore he would concede them nothing. He gave me permission to return to my post. That was yesterday. You heard him speak today. It is still the firm hand, but I must to London. There, indeed, exists a firm hand, but it is concealed, and so directed by hatred of me that it may project the avalanche that will overwhelm us all."

The gallant seized her hand instead and pressed it

Tired with long converse, Strafford sank into a troubled sleep, from which he was awakened at last by the stopping of the carriage in front of his town house.

CHAPTER IV.—Proposal.

The house was prepared for his reception, fires blazing, and a table spread in the room to which he conducted his daughter.

"Mrs. Jarrett," said the earl to his housekeeper, who looked with wonder at the girl, "this is my daughter, newly found, having lived till now with her grandfather in the north. She is the child of my second wife, Frances Warburton."

After supper, when she arose to retire, he kissed her on the lips, ruffling her wayward, curling black hair—so much like his own—and patting her affectionately on the shoulder.

"You will not be afraid of me from this time forward, child?" he asked. "Indeed, Frances, I grow superstitious as I become older, and I look on your strange arrival as in some measure providential. There is none of my own kind to whom I can speak freely, as I did to you in the carriage; my other daughters are too young. My Lady Strafford dislikes this London house and this London town, for which small blame is to be imputed to her. In you, a man's courage is added to a woman's wit. Who knows? You may be the rapier by my side."

Long time Frances Wentworth lay awake after she had retired. Was it possible that she was to be thus transplanted, to stand by the side of the greatest man in England? She planned the days to come. She would be as subtle as the craftiest. Her tongue must measure what it said and all rural bluntness should disappear.

It was two hours after midday the next day when Strafford sent for his daughter. De Courcy was with him and rose as she entered, to present her with one of his down-reaching bows.

"My child," said the earl, "I am about to set out for parliament and it may be late before I return. Yet I think you shall sup with me at 7 if all goes well and debate becomes not too strenuous, but do not wait in case I should be detained. I counsel you not leave the house today, for there seem many brawlers upon the streets. My friend De Courcy here begs the favor of some converse with you and speaks with my approval."

Strafford looked keenly at the girl and her heart thrilled as she read the unspoken message with quick intuition. He had some use for De Courcy and she must be sauve and diplomatic. Thus already she was her father's ally.

"Sir, I shall obey you in all things and hope to win your commendation," said Frances with an inclination of the head.

No sooner was the earl quit of the room than De Courcy flung himself at her feet. Her first impulse was to step quickly back, but she checked it and stood her ground.

"O, divine Frances," he cried, "how impatiently I have waited for this rapt moment, when I might declare to you——"

"Sir, I beg of you to arise. 'Tis not seemly you should demean yourself thus."

"'Tis seemly that the whole world should grovel at you feet, my lady of the free forest, for all who look upon you must love you, and I adore you and do here avow it."

"I implore you to arise."

The gallant seized her hand instead and pressed his lips to it. The tremor which passed over her at this action was misinterpreted by his unquenchable vanity.

The tension was relieved by a low roar from the street, a sound that had in it the menace of a wild beast angered.

"Good heaven! What is that?" she exclaimed, snatching away her hand and running to the window. Her suitor rose to his feet, daintily dusted the knees of his silken ware with a film of lace that did duty for a handkerchief, and followed her.

The street below was packed with people, howling round a carriage that seemed blocked by the press. The stout coachman, gorgeous in splendid livery, had some ado to restrain the spirited horses, maddened and prancing with the interference and the outcry. Cudgels were shaken aloft in the air, and there were shouts of "Traitor!" "Tyrant!" and other epithets so degrading that Frances put her hands to her ears in horrified dismay.

"Whom are they threatening so fiendishly?" she whispered.

"That is your father's carriage," answered De Courcy.

Before she could make further inquiry there came up to them the cold dominating tone of her father's voice, clear even above that tumult:

"Strike through!"

The stout coachman laid about him with his whip, and the curses for the moment abandoned the head of Strafford to alight on the head of the driver. The horses plunged fiercely into the crowd. The cruel progress changed the tenor of the cries, as if a wailing stop of a great organ had suddenly taken the place of the open diapason. The press was so great that those in front could not make for safety, and the disappearing coach was greeted with screams of terror and was followed by groans of agony. Men went down before it like ripe grain before a sickle.

"Oh! oh! oh!" moaned the girl, all color leaving her face.

"It serves the dogs right," said De Courcy. "How dare they block the way of a noble and the chief minister of state?"

"I—I cannot look on this," lamented Frances, shrinking back to the table and leaning against it as one about to faint, forgetting her desire to avoid further demonstration from her companion in the trepidation which followed the scene she had witnessed.

"Indeed, they were most mercifully dealt with, those scullions. The king of France would have sent a troop of horse to saber them back into their kennels. 'Strike through!' cried his lordship, and, by God, 'tis a good phrase, most suitable motto for a coat-of-arms, a hand grasping a dagger above it. 'Strike through!' I shall not forget it. But 'twas a softer and more endearing theme I wished to"——

"Sir, I beseech your polite consideration. I am nigh distraught with what I have seen, and am filled with a fear of London. 'Tis not the courtly city I expected to behold. I am not myself."

"But you will at least bid me hope?"

"Surely, surely, all of us may hope."

"Why, 'twas the last and only gift left in Pandora's casket, and London were grim indeed to be more bereft than the receptacle of that deceitful woman. May I make my first draught on Madame Pandora's box by hoping that I am to see you at this hour tomorrow?"

"Yes—tomorrow—tomorrow!" gasped the girl faintly.

But that tomorrow was not to come. Before night the great house was barricaded and the lights were put out to show noo beam through the heavy shutters. Like a phantom army the servants of the household stood in the gloom of the wide hall, with bared swords, ready for the worst should the mob beat in the doors. For hours they had been waiting for news of Strafford, and none had come. Only his treasurer had come to the house, after much mishandling by the mob, with the news that all London was crying that Strafford had been arrested in parliament and taken to the Tower.

At last there was a timid knock at the door during a lull in the street. It was an envoy from the earl himself, and he brought a letter addressed to Mistress Frances Wentworth. It read:

"Sweetheart—You have heard before this what hath befallen me, yet trust thou in the goodness of God, that my enemies shall do me no hurt. I am troubled that you should be in London at this time, where I can be of no help to you. It would please me to know that you were safe in the home where you have lived until the present time. Think not that you can assist me other than by obeying, for I trust in God and the king, and in the assurance that I am innocent of the charges malice hath brought against me. Therefore, be in no way alarmed, but betake yourself straightway to the north, there to wait with thy brother as heretofore until I send a message for you, which I hope to do right speedily. Travel in comfort and security, and take with you such of my household as will secure both.

"My treasurer, John Vollins, will give you all moneys you require, and this letter is his assurance to fulfill your wishes in this and every respect. Trust in God. Give way to no fear, but bear yourself as my daughter. Your loving father,

"STRAFFORD."

The young woman folded the letter without a word, except to the secretary, to whom she said:

"My father writes in good confidence, seeing no cause for alarm, having assurance of his innocence and faith in God and the king."

(To be continued next Sunday.)

The Earl's hand trembled until the letter that he held shook like the autumn leaves above him.